- Photo by Robert L. Stevenson

Three Cheers for Attrition Warfare

Most practitioners of maneuver warfare are forced into it through circumstance

by Lieutenant Colonel Steven J. Eden

What's all this nonsense I keep reading about "maneuver warfare" and "revolutions in military affairs"? You can't swing a dead cat these days without hitting some SAMS graduate espousing a vision of future warfare that is one part *Starship Troopers,* one part *Ulzana's Raid,* and three parts pure hokum. In their view, the centerpiece of the modern battlefield will be a wired-warrior, laser designator in one hand and UNICEF box in the other. Below, I have listed all the reasons this will not come to pass.

Maneuver Warfare Is a Poor Man's Game

> *"There is no military virtue in being outnumbered."*
>
> – J.F.C Fuller

Let's try an exercise. Think of all the great 'maneuver' commanders you have known. The typical armor officer (whose idea of studying military history consists of popping in a CD of *Patton*) should be able to list Rommel, Lee, Napoleon, maybe von Manstein and Stonewall Jackson. Those with more interest in their chosen profession might include Forrest, Winfield Scott, MacArthur, Grant, and Marlborough. Those would be my choices from the last three hundred years or so — yours might be different. It might include Giap, Geronimo, and Garibaldi. Doesn't matter. Just draw up your top ten.

Now, you will probably notice that most of those on your list are losers. They may have fought brilliantly, they may have done more with the resources they had than could be reasonably expected, but they still lost.

Of the rest, most were facing situations where they were desperately outnumbered or hamstrung in some other way, and reliance on maneuver warfare was the only way to advance the cause. In other words, they were out of options. They had to accept extreme risks to win, such as MacArthur's landing at Inchon or Scott's march on Mexico City.

This is not to say that maneuver warfare is a bad thing. Grant used it during the Vicksburg campaign to win a resounding victory. It is just that very few wars are decided by maneuvering. Most practitioners of maneuver warfare are forced into it through circumstance — and most end up losing.

Maneuver Warfare Doesn't Work Against Competent Foes

> *"To obtain a perfect Cannae, it is necessary to have a Hannibal on one side, a Terentius Varro on the other."*
>
> – Alfred von Schlieffen

Why? Because maneuver warfare is risky business, competent opponents are able to exploit those risks, if they only have the nerve and resources to do so. Grant beat the hell out of Sterling Price using maneuver warfare. When

he tried it against Robert E. Lee, he ended up with huge casualty lists and settled into the siege of Richmond. Napoleon worked his maneuverist gig for years, but once the Allies got the hang of his style, they used it against him quite successfully. Some say his 1814 campaign defending France from invasion was his most brilliant, but so what? Who ended up in Paris, and who ended up cooling his heels on Elba?

The Blitzkrieg worked great up until about 1942, when the Russians and Montgomery finally broke the code on how to absorb the toughest blows, conserve their combat power, and apply it in a devastating counterattack. Sure, Rommel and von Manstein were able to mount some cruel ripostes in their respective theaters, but in the end they succumbed. Remember, there are no points for style in war — you win or you lose.

Attrition Is Not a Dirty Word

"The day goes to the side that is first able to plaster its opponents with fire."

– Erwin Rommel

When I say attrition warfare, what do you think of? World War I, probably. Attrition means we trade casualties, and because I have more bodies, I win in the end, right? Now, World War I strikes many as a cautionary tale, but think about it for a moment. Who won? The side that successfully applied attrition. Was it ugly? Yes. Was there any other choice? No. In World War I, the Germans developed a maneuverist approach to warfare, known variously as infiltration, storm trooper, or von Hutier tactics. They avoided strong points, struck deep with well-trained small units to disrupt the enemy, and relied on their moral supremacy to defeat larger, better-supplied forces. They 'flowed like water,' in the words of an oft-quoted but seldom-read Chinese bureaucrat who died a long time ago. And they lost. By following the path of least resistance, they ended up…well, nowhere particularly important. The Allies, on the other hand, broke the back of the German Army in 1918 by applying firepower (and a certain newfangled tracked vehicle) with all the art learned at terrible cost during four years of trench warfare.

Now, I would call the Persian Gulf a war of attrition. Yes, we did maneuver a bit, but mostly to get in position to apply firepower. On the ground, it resembled police call, with units on line, chewing up a hapless and ineffectual enemy. True, we didn't trade casualties with the Iraqis; instead, we traded gold (in the form of very expensive bombs and long-rod penetrators) for blood — the epitome of American-style warfare. So, how about this definition of attrition: I don't worry about 'dislocating' you, or attacking your 'centers of gravity.' I just kill your soldiers, destroy your vehicles, bomb your headquarters, etc., until you give up or lose the ability to resist my will. The leisurely and methodical way I go about it contributes to the sense of hopelessness that ultimately leads to your defeat.

New Tools, Same Paradigm

"In the name of charity, let us forget the last war."

– Guilio Douhet

Many would say that the new tools of warfare — precision guided munitions, digital communications, satellite surveillance, and advanced sensors — must inevitably lead to reliance on maneuver warfare. Like ships at sea, units will duck and weave across a borderless battlefield, concentrating to deal heavy blows, then dispersing like morning mist to avoid the inevitable response.

I doubt it. First comes logistics. Until we can teleport fuel, bullets, food, and replacements, there must be a secure rear area and a relatively reliable ground transportation system to feed the fighting units. This means terrain must be denied to the enemy, which requires that a line of some sort be held. Secondly, given all the above wonders of advanced science, I believe maneuver will decrease in importance compared to the application of firepower. Look at naval warfare, after all. The reason why ships at sea can maneuver, well, like ships at sea, is because they are (or were) invisible in the vastness of the ocean. The U-boat was a successful weapon early in World War II because it was virtually undetectable until it actually engaged a convoy. By 1944, radar, sonar, and escort carriers allowed the Allies to find the submarines before they could mount an attack, and they were shot like fish in a barrel.

Why do we maneuver? To gain an advantage in the application of firepower by approaching or engaging the enemy from an unexpected direction, to avoid his strength and exploit his weakness. If we have perfect situational awareness, and a measure of operational competence, why bother? The enemy's maneuvers will accomplish nothing, as we will be able to respond to them. If they have SA (as the cognoscenti refer to it), our own maneuvers will be similarly unavailing. On the other hand, with perfect SA, we can apply our firepower very effectively. We can, in effect, kill our way into a position from which to gain victory. What is the result, then, of the 'revolution in military affairs'? If our advantages in weaponry are great enough, it will create an unparalleled killing field — the Persian Gulf, only better. If they are not, we will have a slugging match — with higher tech weapons and at greater ranges, but still a slugging match. Victory will go to the side that best uses its firepower to create exploitable advantages, or has the most bodies to trade.

Asymmetric Warfare Means "I Have Tanks and You Don't"

"The heavy prevail over the light."

– Wang Xi

Ah, but nobody can match our technological edge. The future of warfare is asymmetric warfare, where we have all the new toys and the bad guys only have grit and some Soviet castoffs. No one can challenge us conventionally, so no one will. Instead, they'll surround themselves with orphans, position snipers in every minaret, and fire off exceptionally harsh e-mails to our loved ones and the *New York Times.* Tanks are useless in such situations; instead, we need to airdrop PAOs, psyops specialists, MREs, counterintelligence agents, and a few grunts (highly lethal but compassionate and well-versed on local conditions) for security.

Truth is, nobody challenges us conventionally because we are damn good at that sort of thing and because we still have the means to fight. That doesn't mean that nobody will. The best way to

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encourage a symmetric challenge is to allow our edge to deteriorate, either qualitatively or quantitatively.

And it is important that we continue to discourage symmetric challenges, even if that hampers us in our ability to fight asymmetric wars, because only foes that look like us (in terms of conventional warfighting) can threaten our national security. Asymmetric wars may cause us grief, they may cause us casualties, but they will never cut us off from vital natural resources, deprive us of freedom of the seas, or topple our strongest allies. Like Ludendorff's storm troopers, terrorists and their ilk can only follow the path of least resistance — and it will take them nowhere.

Not that Special Forces, RSTA squadrons, and light infantry don't have their uses. We need to be able to enforce our will in distant, dusty lands; there will be more Bosnias and Afghanistans down the road.

It's just that our conventional warfighting ability is inevitably eroded as we spend more of our resources on bargain-basement units. We've gone from a two-and-a-half war strategy to a one-war-and-one-forest-fire force, and who knows where it will end. We might as well put up signs in selected theaters reading "Site of future Alamo." One thing this Army does not need is more glorious defeats to add to our string of wartime opening acts.

I Hold These Truths To Be Self-Evident

"The phrase 'history teaches,' when encountered in argument, usually portends bad history and worse logic."

– Bernard Brodie

Sometime in the near future, our Army will be called upon to fight a competent, numerous, and well-equipped enemy. I don't know who it will be, and you don't either. In 1890, nobody figured we'd be taking on the Germans in thirty years. Ditto for North Korea in 1920 or Iraq in 1960. We may not have air superiority, we may not be able to dominate the electro-magnetic spectrum, and we might not even be able to secure our lines of communications. We will have to hold hilltops and clear cities, breach minefields and employ metal to tear flesh. I hope we have enough tanks, attack helicopters, mechanized infantry, and artillery to do the job, because it will be my children (and yours) on the line.

Call me Colonel Blimp if you want, but that is what I see in my crystal ball. Why do so many disagree with me?

1. LOM drill. Nobody gets ahead nowadays by advocating traditional methods of warfighting, particularly if they involve casualties.

2. Cavalry syndrome. Anybody who claims the tank has a future is regarded with pitying condescension. They are compared with those benighted souls who fought so hard to keep the horse cavalry.

3. Alvin Toffler. Soldiers are so sensitive to charges that they are always preparing for the last war that they now consciously seek to prepare for the next one. This is admirable, in theory, but in practice they are lousy at it. The operative assumption is that technology is going to make the next war radically different from the last, but it's a postulate based on a mixture of pop psychology, bad history, and wishful thinking.

Warfare in the 20th century looked radically different from war in the 19th century because of two inventions: the radio and the internal combustion engine. Internal combustion provided enough power for tanks and aircraft, while the radio and the truck allowed for the type of operational maneuvering that returned mobility to the battlefield. I am aware of computers, miniaturization, and digital communications, but these are not paradigm-busters in the same way.

Tanker, Fear Not

"How can one say that maneuver and attrition are anything other than indistinguishable?"

– Chris Bellamy

Those who say the Persian Gulf was the last war of its kind are wrong. It is probably the last one where we will hold all the cards, but someone, somewhere, is going to tire of the *Pax Americana* — and he might be more competent than Saddam. Those who predict the tank will die due to increases in lethality are wrong. Top attack and chemical energy weapons can and will be countered by defensive measures — tactical and technological. Those who say it is too expensive are wrong. The M1A2 is only four times as expensive, in constant dollars, as the Sherman was in 1942 — now, who would trade an Abrams for four M4s? Those who say the Abrams is too heavy — well, they may have a point. The damn thing is nearly seventy tons.

But you can lighten a tank without making it something else. A tank, after all, is defined by its function — a direct fire weapon with sufficient protection to move over open ground in relative safety. The tank is still too versatile and powerful to disappear. It can kill anything, while it is protected from a wider variety of weapons than any other system on the battlefield. That protection gives it more tactical mobility than anything else stuck on the ground. And we will need it, because the next big war will be won by attrition — not maneuver.

LTC Steve Eden was commissioned in Armor from the U.S. Military Academy in 1982. He served as a cavalry platoon leader, troop XO, and S3 Air with 2-9 Cavalry at Fort Stewart Ga. After AOAC, he served as C Company and HHC commander with 1-68 Armor in Wildflecken, FRG. Following command, he earned his M.A. in history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, then served as an instructor in the History Department at USMA. After CGSC, he was the chief of Operations, G3, 4th ID (M). In 1996, he became S3, 1-66 Armor at Fort Hood, Texas, followed by an assignment as XO of the same unit. In 1997, he was selected as the Armor Exchange Officer to the British Army, serving two years in the UK as the deputy commander of the Royal Armoured Corps AFV Gunnery School. In July, 1999, he was reassigned to Fort Knox. After a year as the DCO, 16th Cavalry Regiment, he assumed command of 3d Battalion, 81st Armor, his current assignment.